

THE QUESTION OF SYMBOLISM

The following conversation is excerpted from the Master Jury's five-day meeting in June 1995.

Mehmet Konuralp: It is impossible to consider the mosque, the tower and the hospital only on the basis of architecture, because each has a different function. If we are going to consider the contextual and the thematic sides of each project, I would say that architecture is a part of it, but not all of it.

Peter Eisenman: Clearly, these projects have different functions. They are linked together because we are talking about architecture's symbolic value to the contemporary discourse and not whether it functions as a hospital or a school. We don't care whether the Franco-Sénégalaise project functions. Is the auditorium there good? Do the offices work? Are the bathrooms convenient? We don't care about the functional discourse, we are talking about an iconic role that these buildings play both in Muslim society and in the greater discourse of architecture. I disagree that we need to make these functional distinctions.

Luis Monreal: I disagree. I think that the notion or the criteria of public function is also to be taken into account, not to be forgotten. You architects too often tend to view buildings just as *un geste*.

Charles Jencks: Obviously, these have different qualities. We are defending the mosque, in so far as we are not attacking it, because it is a conceptual breakthrough. We like it because it is conceptually rigorous and interesting, but no one likes its historicism. Kaedi is a functionally good hospital, but I wouldn't defend it for functionalism.

Darmawan Prawirohardjo: Is Kaedi not contextual as well, functionally contextual?

Eisenman: If we premiate Kaedi Hospital because it

functions well as a hospital, that is a patronising gesture. It will be seen as such, because people in the hospital world will say, 'What are they talking about?' It is the symbolism of Kaedi in the community that is important, not whether it functions well as a hospital.

Konuralp: I was trying to ask whether given a budget and a problem and the situation of available materials, the hospital meets these various parts of the problem adequately and, in addition, is an acceptable piece of architecture.

Monreal: Kaedi Hospital is not a substandard solution at all. First of all, you have to see where this hospital is located. You cannot expect modern ward conditions because, among other things, electricity is sometimes unavailable; the safest way to run that hospital is to work within the local conditions. This architecture is effective in meeting these conditions. In terms of architectural form, it is interesting not only because of the use of local materials, but because in some respects, this is a very successful reinterpretation of forms that exist in that area. I see echoes of Islam and echoes of Maghreb architecture. It is a remarkable project in all respects, both iconically and functionally.

Nayyar Ali Dada: I would like to point out that guests are accommodated here. This too shows the quality of the project. It is not based on a European model but is looking after the local problems.

Jencks: Kaedi was admirable because it tested a new, innovative brick technology in an area which has a shortage of timber. In that sense, it is functionally progressive and innovative. The language of architecture which stems from this use of brick is introduced in these lens forms, parabolic dome forms, various rib forms, and what I would call 'petal' architectural language, which makes it cutting edge. It was most innovative in using brick because it invented

new forms. It has also had a very enthusiastic public response. But in spite of being an absolutely key building, it hasn't yet been sustainable because the local population hasn't copied it.

Konuralp: If it is an ingenious piece of architecture it cannot be defended on those sentimental values. I am very interested in the hygienic side of Kaedi, so we can defend it on the bases of what it is doing in the given community, given the standards, money and materials available.

Eisenman: The Kaedi Hospital is not an examination of the sentimental and the nostalgic. I want to suggest the possibility of the critical nature of the award and using that as a standard. In his first critique Kant says that the critical is an examination of the conditions of the possibility for knowledge. Kant also suggests that since the 'ideal' is unrealisable in the present, the critical becomes the heuristic, to insinuate those negative characteristics that dispel the possibility of an idealised present back into the culture in a positive way. The ideal of utopia today is an impossibility. What we need is this critical view, which is the re-interpretation of the negative within a positive framework.

Mohammed Arkoun: With the premises of Kant how can I disagree?

Eisenman: Kaedi contains a critical dimension. Kaedi is far different from other projects we've seen in its critical dimension of existing discourses, in ways of forming. Kaedi transforms the existing discourse.

Arkoun: What would happen if Kaedi is imitated?

Eisenman: I do not believe a project like Kaedi is generalisable because it is so unique.

Ismail Serageldin: If Kaedi transforms a critical discourse, then Menara does much more so for me. It has a capacity for a much further reach than the hospital and, as such, all the arguments that we used for Kaedi would apply to Menara.

Eisenman: The tower says something about the possibility of a tall building in a tropical climate. We have to construct high-rise buildings. This one is provocative, it talks about something that I could defend architecturally anywhere in the world. It is not about the Muslim world or the western world or the Oriental world; rather, it says something about architectural quality.

Konuralp: Menara is a unique piece of architecture, but it is made with very expensive materials and a lot of money and big patronage. It is a sculpture, not an office block that we could see as a feasible, reasonable, inventive type of its kind.

Eisenman: I want to disagree with that for the basis of future discussion. First of all, no place else in the world has IBM occupied a building this radical. It is a unique building for IBM, which may be brought on by its unique situation. Number two, all of the corporate buildings in Malaysia are nightmares of colonial capital implanted in a society that shouldn't be doing that kind of thing. For example, the West is destroying Shanghai as we speak. But here we have an example of a replicable corporate high-rise building that is environmentally sensitive, that has sculptural features, is sensitive to local discourse, and is also forward-looking. As a model it is much more replicable than Kaedi, even in places like Phoenix, Arizona and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Monreal: Because of the region where this building has been erected, and because the economy of that region (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and so on) has a very good

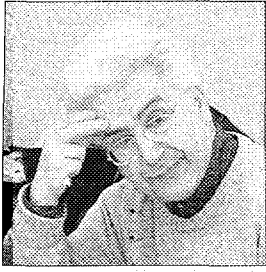
prospect of growth, Menara would be a very good precedent for architectural quality in corporate architecture.

Jencks: It is important how we perceive and classify things. When I look at this mosque in Riyadh, I see the thousands of references in the 'ears', the flat roofs, the mud bricks, the little triangles; all of those signs. There may be ten signs that are quoted in a slightly new form, but not so new that they are not highly recognisable. I smell heavy symbolism here, but I support symbolic architecture. To decide what kind of architecture this is, I have to ask, who is it for? What is it? And what does it legitimise? To me this is an accommodating building; it is traditionalesque and Post-Modern. The common person on the street would say this is Post-Modern, and I would say it's PO-MO, which means a Post-Modernism that is corrupt. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see the slightest evidence that this isn't an accommodating building.

Monreal: It is a good idea for the buildings and spaces around the mosque to be reviewed together, because when we look at the plan, we realise they were planned together, as an urban ensemble in an area that needed redevelopment. What I consider positive is a good general concept of the space, the urban spacing of the palace and a good job of integrating and healing a scar in the city. This is positive. Second, this kind of architectural language is not a nuanced sensitivity to the traditional Najdi style, and it would be absurd to try to show a direct connection with a Najdi style. The materials, volumes, dimensions and requirements are all different. The old buildings worked with natural climate. This building is hermetic, to allow air conditioning. Nevertheless, there are interesting echoes of some Najdi elements which are nicely blended. In a city like Riyadh, what is the value of this type of architecture? The alternative is cheap corporate architecture for mosques or palaces or banks or whatever. Isn't this type of architectural solution and language preferable to that?

Arkoun: My feeling is that we should avoid awarding the mosque for the following reasons. Since the beginning, the Award has been given to several mosques. For me, we have to be very careful not to give any more awards to a mosque except if it brings a really modern, new approach to religious architecture as a whole. This is, for me, a very big point. This is one message that the Award could give on this matter, and that separates religious architecture from all other categories in architecture, because there is something to be achieved, to be said, in that category, which does not yet exist throughout the Muslim world. That is why I regret that the mosque in Ankara doesn't raise enthusiasm so that we can support it and give it an award. Riyadh doesn't express new symbolic language about the expression of religious spirituality through architecture today. I would say this even for Christian architecture. I don't see any achievement in Christian architecture which I would consider as raising new issues. So we are building a series of mosques, more or less reproducing what you call the stereotype of heavy symbolism, which is absolutely true. I would never award again any mosque if it doesn't bring this new language to new things in religious architecture. This is a very strong point. Creativity seems to be repressed in Muslim societies by structural reasons, not only by the political power, which is there and watching and imposing, but also by structure, deep structure in which we are trapped, unable to express ourselves. That is why we get so few projects which raise enthusiasm.

Serageldin: This poses the issue of architects working for authority structures all around the world and the freedom they have *vis-à-vis* clients. The question of the creativity of the architect and whether or not it has been suppressed is an issue that should not be assumed. In this particular case, the architect was not suppressed in terms of what he did for the mosque. He represents a clear line of thinking in that part of the world. What you have seen is one manifestation of that line of thinking, in the same way that



Arkoun

El-Wakil represents a different kind of thinking. Both have been able to express their ways of building mosques in Saudi Arabia. I don't think we should overlook this particular project. Rasem Badran is building the same way, with his own language of reinterpretation and so on, whether he is building in Jordan or Saudi Arabia or elsewhere.

Jencks: I applaud your point. However, there is a problem here of self-imposed conventions which presuppose certain things. When I read that architecture, I see stereotypes and I see politenesses; it doesn't mean that Badran has censored himself consciously. It is unconscious self-censorship and politeness, and that's the danger for architecture.

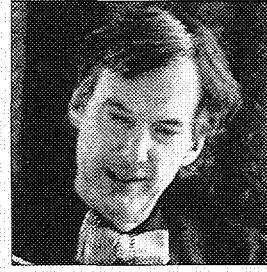
Serageldin: Let's defeat or support this project on its architectural merits. It may lack creativity, you may not agree with the style it is trying to express, but I don't think you should overload it with ideological content. The Saudi government has sponsored the El-Wakil mosques; it has sponsored the Bin Ladin mosques and the mosques done by Badran. They are all different languages.

Eisenman: I still think you have to hear Arkoun's statement about the generic creative problem.

Serageldin: You find that generic creative problem all over the Muslim world. It has more to do with identity than with power.

Arkoun: Yes. Mine is a general statement, because we have disregarded religious culture as a whole. We are unable to have an architectural vocabulary to adapt the expression of religious experience today.

Konuralp: I want to try to analyse the architecture of the project. We must also be concerned with what the building is about, how it works, and what it brings to the city as a physical piece of architecture. In my opinion, this is a



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good example of the ordinary. It is not making any breakthroughs in the evolution of the mosque concept, which we need in almost all Muslim communities. The architect's thesis of basing his initial concept on the historically existing mosque is a very good beginning to a project like this, but the previous structure looked far more ingenious and interesting. Yet, it is a good example of structurally adapting to quite advanced techniques. He is using column heads, but he doesn't hesitate to use them as outlets for the air-conditioning ducts. There also is this duality of trying to fit in the historical stuff, and yet putting up these prefabricated walls which look like the Damascus mosque, like something borrowed from somewhere else. Technology also has a language, or many ways to express itself, that precludes the need to go back in history and try to imitate an ornamental piece. It is like creating Gothic architecture in reinforced concrete, which I am very much against. This mosque has not been able to contribute anything like the breakthrough messages we are looking for.

Serageldin: The mosque is an expression of a serious architect trying to do a particular type of architecture. Whether we want to premiate that part of architecture is what I think the debate should be about. I think it does do certain things better than many other examples I've seen, but if I have to choose on the basis of an architectural breakthrough, I give my vote to the Ankara mosque, even if its architectural quality is not as moving as this one.